

# Ecological Identity through Dialogue

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## **Abstract**

*Martin Buber's philosophy of dialogue offers an epistemic and ontological orientation upon which an ecological identity can be established as part of an integrated, environmental education. I consider here the significance of a relational self in establishing this ecological identity, as well as the benefits of doing so. This relational, dialogical self is developed through a comprehensive, integrated approach of nurturing dialogical capacities: becoming aware by confirmation of the other; and empathic inclusion. In turn, these capacities can be developed through a praxis of dialogue that includes artistic, contemplative, and relational pedagogical practices.*

## **Résumé**

*La philosophie de Martin Buber sur le dialogue présente une orientation épistémique et ontologique à partir de laquelle peut être établie une identité écologique dans le contexte d'une éducation environnementale intégrée. J'examine ici l'importance d'un moi relationnel dans l'établissement de cette identité écologique, ainsi que les avantages de cette méthode. Ce moi relationnel et dialogique se développe par un concours global et intégré de facultés dialogiques protectrices : le sujet prend conscience de soi en confirmant l'autre, et en l'accueillant avec empathie. À leur tour, ces facultés peuvent se développer par l'exercice d'un dialogue mettant en jeu des pratiques pédagogiques artistiques, contemplatives et relationnelles.*

**Keywords:** dialogue, relationality, Buber, ecological identity, environmental education

## Introduction ~ Considering Trees

"I consider a tree." (Buber, 1958/2000, p. 22)

These four words from Martin Buber's *I and Thou* (1958/2000) introduce an epistemological shift—further developed in *Between Man and Man* (1947/2002) and his essays in *The Knowledge of Man* (1965)—which lies along the road toward an ecological identity: a relational, ecological sense of self. Developing such an identity can form part of an integrated, comprehensive environmental education. In this paper, I will consider three specific elements of Buber's relational episteme—becoming aware of the fullness of the other and how the other addresses you, confirmation of the other, and inclusion of the other—and how they contribute to an ontological sense of relatedness to one's surrounding ecologies. I also consider how artistic, contemplative, and dialogical pedagogical practices

can contribute to the ontological shift, becoming part of a broadly-conceived environmental education program.

I am conceiving an ecological identity as this ontological sense of identification with surrounding ecologies, up to and including the global commons, as one's own, as one's home. One's sense of identity becomes more deeply connected to the various physical, sociocultural, and historical ecologies in which we are immersed and in which we develop. Moreover, one has an increased moral concern for the well-being of the members of these ecologies, just as one might have a concern for one's own well-being; there is a felt sense of belonging and commitment to the global commons. Of course, there are varying degrees of this felt sense of ecological identity. Mitchell Thomashow (1995) asserts that ecological identity includes all the differing ways people relate to the earth, and that "Nature becomes an object of identification" (p. 3). Where I might differ slightly with Thomashow's concept is with regard to his point that ecological identity "transcends" social and cultural interactions. I would suggest it transcends but also includes these. The primary and fundamental sense inherent in ecological identity is a recognition that one is a relational being, intimately connected to others—both animate and inanimate—through a web of relationships, and the awareness that one's actions have varying degrees of influence on the web just as one is influenced by it.

Buber casts dialogue as an ontological orientation characterized by a confirming and inclusive relationality—and points the way to its development through an epistemological shift he characterizes as *devotio*. The essence of *devotio* is receptivity to what is unfolding, possible, and unknown, occurring in the presence of close, developing relationships. *Devotio* represents for Buber a phenomenological perspective in which the knowledge of a thing is contained in the relationship itself; thus a thing cannot be spoken of something in and of itself since it is ontically defined in and through the relationship it has with something or someone else.

### Why an Ecological Identity?

To begin, I will consider the significance of a relational, ecological identity. As Hilary Inwood (2008) notes, when learners develop stronger bonds to their ecologies, they are increasingly likely to care for them in sustainable ways. Given the significant impact of human activity on the global biosphere, the well-being of the biosphere hinges on our ability to establish relationships with our surrounding ecologies which are not purely utilitarian from a human perspective. Meeting the significant environmental challenges of, for example, what John Holdren (2008) calls "global climatic disruption" (p. 5) and the loss of biodiversity in sea, land, and air, will require us to establish relationships with the rest of the biosphere that are mutually beneficial. These relationships will have to base themselves on an epistemological orientation in which we see ourselves not as separate from but

*immersed in* and as *members of* the various ecologies I outline above. We need to, in the words of Tim Lilburn (1999), live in the world “as if it were home” (p. xiii). We might accomplish this through an intersubjective knowing, a knowing that emerges through one’s active relationships with others propelled by what Buber (1947/2002) terms the “strong-winged Eros of dialogue” (p. 33). For Buber, eros is a longing, a creative force that can propel the individual to know the other as the beloved with an empathic understanding he terms inclusion (to be discussed below). It is through eros that we come to the epistemic stance of *devotio*.

As both Neil Evernden (1993) and Charles Taylor (1989, 1991) point out, there is an abundance of evidence regarding our disconnected, instrumental orientation towards the rest of the biosphere—what Buber terms the *I-It* relationship—and while our instrumental and objective stance in the world has allowed us to accomplish much, it has been at the cost of immediacy and intimacy, not to mention environmental and human degradation. Moreover, Evernden argues that we have a mass of assumptions about the physical environment which legitimate our disengaged, disconnected, dispassionate use of it: that it is ontically separate from us, that we must “subdue,” or “control” it, or that we have the moral right to do so. The world becomes an objectified “it.” We know *I-It* relationships, and they remain part of our lives; here, the “I” is pure subject, the bearer of perceptions. Against that sense of “I,” the world remains the object of perceptions; we objectify and instrumentalize others.

But whenever the sentence “I see the tree” is so uttered that it no longer tells of a relation between the man—I—and the tree—*Thou*—but establishes the perception of the tree as an object by the human consciousness, the barrier between subject and object has been set up. The primary world *I-It*, the word of separation, has been spoken. (Buber, 1958/2000, p. 35)

Our mistake, suggest Buber, Evernden, and Taylor, is in asserting the primacy of the individual *qua* individual and that individual’s perception against a more relational orientation. When we see the other as *Thou*, Buber (1958/2000) asserts, we do not see an object to be experienced by us but as an inherently valuable being “whole in himself” [sic] who, because of our perception of that wholeness, “fills the heavens” (p. 23) and remains unbounded by narrow, instrumentalist conceptions. Taylor (1989) argues that the modernist self, a tribute to the legacies of John Locke and Rene Descartes, sees itself as disengaged and autonomous, as opposed to being engaged with *logos*, in a *dia-logos*. The autonomous, independent, removed self engages in what David Jardine (1998) calls the “manic pursuit of excellence-as-self-absorption” and the phallogocentric desire to “end up ‘on top’” (p. 88). Buber (1958) notes that we know how to “speak about things and beings in an illuminating fashion, but the great insight that our relations to things and beings form the marrow of our existence seems to have become alien to life” (p. 40).

But against this, we have the ontological stance of relationality. We exist in and cannot exist without intricate webs of relationships: physical, familial,

educational, institutional, cultural, and historical. Antoine de Saint Exupéry (1942) describes how we may refer to a farm by its fields, streams, pastures, and cattle. Although each contributes to the farm, the farm is more than each of those or even the sum of their parts. The farm consists of “something else: the relationships between all of its constituent parts. The cattle, by that something else, become cattle of the farm, the meadows the meadows of a farm, the fields the fields of a farm” (p. 145). Where there are no relationships or ties that bind people, they are “not united but merely lined up” (p. 142). Our challenge lies in seeing how an ontological shift to dialogical relationality can change our behaviour to the environment such that we more readily understand how our behaviours influence other members of the biosphere. Our continuing challenge as environmental educators lies in developing these relational, ecological ontologies, assisting students in seeing themselves as existing in complex webs of physical, sociocultural, historical, and spiritual relationships, not needing to ask for whom the bell tolls, knowing that it tolls for each and all of us. Keiji Nishitani (1982) writes: “Even the tiniest thing, to the extent that it ‘is,’ displays in its act of being the whole web of circuminsessional interpenetration that links all things together” (p. 149).

A moral stance emerges out of such an epistemic stance; Jardine (1998) responds that we no longer judge and rule, but rather “become deeply conversant with things, listening, asking, responding, inhaling, and exhaling” (p. 99) and are more inclined to see ourselves as members and citizens of a global household, *oikos*. Our challenge lies in developing a relational and worldcentric perspective concerning the welfare of our global community. “The significance of relationality is that we develop a relational view of individuality itself, that it is not a thing at all, but a sequence of ways of relating: a panorama of views of the world” (Evernden, 1993, p. 133)—which suggests a viable approach to an ecological ontology through our ways of seeing. The contribution of Buber’s work to environmental education lies in his outline of three, closely-connected dialogical capacities he suggests contribute to what would be a more ecological sense of self: becoming aware of the other, confirming the other, and empathic inclusion of the other. Curricular and pedagogical practices that work on developing these capacities could be incorporated into environmental education programs, whether in primary, secondary, postsecondary, or community-based environmental education programs.

### Awareness of the Other

Martin Heidegger (1971) suggests that we need to learn to dwell. “To dwell, to be set at peace, means to remain at peace within the free, the preserve, the free sphere that safeguards each thing in its nature” (p. 149). Dwelling is ecological: it occurs on the earth, under the sky, before the divinities, and includes a “be-longing to men’s [sic] being with one another” (p. 150). Moreover, it allows us to

unite earth, sky, divinities, and humans; learning to dwell in Heidegger's sense is thus moving toward the development of an ecological identity. Dwelling becomes a "staying with things" (p. 151), which nurses and nurtures, and builds in such a way that things retain their own ontological status: a bridge, for example, allows the river fully to run its course but at the same time allows humans to cross over it. Heidegger concludes that we must "ever learn to dwell" (p. 161). Jardine (1998), building on Heidegger's concept of dwelling, frames dwelling as an educational activity, as a matter of awareness: "to take care and consideration and deep attention to what you are doing (teacher or child), to prolong the sensuous richness of things, or the sonorous richness of words and melodies, to let the resonances ring out fully" (p. 97). In a similar fashion, Evernden (1993) suggests that the development and expansion of our perceptual skills expands the world for us in equal measure. We need to pay attention to awareness.

Buber does. He notes that he can see the tree objectively, observing, measuring, and classifying its objective features (1958/2000, pp. 22-23). Similarly, he can also lord himself over the tree and "subdue its actual presence" by seeing it as existing as a collection of physical forces, and can "dissipate" it into a series of numerical relations. The tree remains an object, objectified: the tree as *It*. But he also notes that he possibly can—and this is an act of will and "grace"<sup>1</sup>—"become bound up in relation to it" (p. 23). In this intersubjective relationship, he becomes "seized by the power of exclusiveness" (p. 23) inherent in the tree, now seeing the ontological wholeness of the tree. He states this phenomenological perspective thusly: "To know—by this I do not mean a storing up of anthropological, historical, sociological knowledge, as important as these are; I mean the immediate knowing, the eye-to-eye knowing of the people in its creative primal hours" (p. 58). (Although this passage refers to people, the principle applies to our knowing of trees, animals, and other members of the biosphere; the significant feature is the immediate, phenomenological perception.) One does not abandon the other ways of seeing the tree; in this mode of perception everything is "indivisibly united in this event" of the *I-Thou* relationship. "Everything belonging to the tree is in this: its form and structure, its colours and chemical composition, its intercourse with the elements and with the stars, are all present in a single whole" (1958/2000, p. 23). One meets the tree, fully, in its fullness; there is now a relationship which binds. Moreover, one perceives the tree's intimate connection with everything else in a subtle, reciprocal intercourse of wholeness. Buber writes that the *Thou* does not consist of things; it is not

*He or She*, bounded from every other *He* and *She*, a specific point in space and time within the net of the world; nor is he a nature able to be experienced and described, a loose bundle of names and qualities. But with no neighbour, and whole in himself, he is *Thou* and fills the heavens. This does not mean that nothing exists except himself. But all else lives in *his* light. (1958/2000, p. 23)

The significance of such awareness lies in our ability to recognize and validate the ontological status of the other, be it a tree or a person. Such recognition

contributes to ethical concern and action for the well-being of the other. In *Between Man and Man*, Buber (1947/2002) considers three epistemic stances. There is the objective, detached way of seeing in the “observer.” The “onlooker” is more an artist: one who “takes up position which lets him [sic] see the object freely, and undisturbed awaits what will be presented to him” (p. 10); such an individual perceives the ontological wholeness of the other. But in establishing an *I-Thou* relationship there is a third epistemic move, one Buber calls a demand for action and the inflicting of destiny. Here, the individual becomes aware that the other “says something” to me, “says something *to me*, addresses something to me, speaks something that enters my own life” (p. 11). There is now the call to responsiveness, response, responsibility—the demands of an ethical relationship. Buber terms this dialogical process “becoming aware.” The significance here is that an individual now becomes aware that he or she is being addressed by the other in such a way that calls for a response:

It by no means needs to be a man of whom I become aware. It can be an animal, a plant, a stone. No kind of appearance or event is fundamentally excluded from the series of the things through which from time to time something is said to me. Nothing can refuse to be the vessel for the Word.<sup>2</sup> The limits of the possibility of dialogue are the limits of awareness. (p. 12)

Our challenge lies in becoming sensitive to the signs all around us, the calls of address from every quarter. “The waves of the æther roar on always, but for most of the time we have turned off our receivers” (p. 13). Buber’s openly aware person also develops a “synthesizing apperception” (1965, p. 62); she or he “becomes aware of wholeness and unity in such a way that from then on he [sic] is able to grasp being as a wholeness and a unity” (p. 63) and sees that each person, thing, or event bears personal and universal significance. Buber challenges us, in the midst of our hectic lives and noisy environments, to develop our listening and perceiving skills; he also challenges us to consider, in the midst of our rational orientations, the possibility of being addressed in ways we might not consider. Buber calls us to heighten our awareness of the other as *Thou* and as one who addresses us. The educational challenge, then, is to create opportunities for students to become aware of the other as *Thou*; for environmental educators, it is the challenge of helping students see various members of our biotic communities as *Thou*.

### Confirmation

Becoming aware means an awareness of the essential *otherness* of the other, the foundation which allows us to confirm the other *qua* other, be it a person, tree, rock, landscape, or ecosystem. Affirming the irreducible wholeness of the other as a being (a wholeness that is both individualistic *and* relational) is the

essence of confirmation. Buber notes that by directing our attention to someone or something, we allow confirmation: “out of the incomprehensibility of what lies to hand this one person steps forth and becomes a presence” (1947/2002, p. 25). For Buber, confirmation respectfully affirms the wholeness of the other, be it a person, an animal, or even an inanimate object—other *qua* other, or what Buber calls “elemental otherness” (1965, p. 69). Respect can involve the act to which the Latin roots of the word point: to look again at the other person, offering a fair, deeper consideration. Nishitani (1982), in a fashion reminiscent of Buber, notes the ecological situated-ness of presence:

*That a thing is itself* means that all other things, while continuing to be themselves, are in the home-ground of that thing; that precisely when a thing is on its own home-ground, everything else is there too; that the roots of every thing spread across into its home ground. (p. 149)

Confirmation is a profound recognition—even though it appears obvious and mundane—that the other is essentially not me and I honour that otherness and wish it to exist and remain. Even more, the presence of the other is (and is seen as) unbounded. The person, as Buber points out in *I and Thou*, does not consist of things, is not a thing, but is “whole in himself [sic], he is *Thou* and fills the heavens” (1958/2000, p. 23). Specific characteristics such as physical properties, or personality, or the other’s relationships to surrounding ecologies, or the “winds of causality” (p. 24) do not determine the other as *Thou*. No naming of qualities or properties establishes the other as *Thou*—there is only “silence before the *Thou*” (p. 49), the humble, irreducible, “unreserved” recognition that the other is, quite simply and profoundly, *Thou*.

That sense of confirmation includes an emotional intimacy. Lilburn (1999) maintains that the conformational encounter with the other “resolves itself into—falls into—a pressing, unrequited fondness that waits before her; this knowledge is the beginning of fidelity, a bedding down with things. It is a mind finding a frail home in the garden of otherness” (pp. 16-17). It is a person demonstrating what Aldo Leopold (1949) characterized as love and respect in our relationships with the land.

Confirmation also opens the door to the *I-Thou* relationship. Once we recognize the other as *Thou*, we can come into an unbounded, unconditional relation. Buber (1947/2002) sees this as the breakthrough: the shattering of solitude into a “strict and transforming meeting” (p. 239). As the word “strict” suggests, such an effort is disciplined, rigorous, and possibly the result of repeated efforts which develop receptivity and openness to grace; Buber (1965) refers to the requirement for an ongoing “devotion to being and becoming” (p. 68).

The educational challenge of confirming others includes that sense of comfort espoused by Karleen Pendleton Jiménez (2008) when she confirms her students: “It’s the land of riff raff and I feel right at home” (p. 124). Buber (1947/2002), in his essay on education, reminds us that educators are called



to confirm the students, accepting and receiving them all regardless of their backgrounds, dispositions, or personalities; we are not just to accept them, but further to see them as whole, inherently valuable beings as they are and as they can become. This is the ongoing work of the dialogical engagement. The additional challenge is to help students come to confirm the presence of the various members of the biotic communities which surround them.

### Empathic Inclusion

David Abram (1996) suggests we are predisposed to a sense of empathy: our senses help us engage with the world, our reason and emotions help us understand it, and we have developed languages to communicate our understandings with one another. Buber characterized inclusion as the ability to gain the perspective of another from both the perspective of the other *and* one's own vantage point (hence the sense of inclusion of the others' perspectives into one's own spheres of reference). In an essay on education, Buber (1947/2002) notes that the teacher must "live this situation, again and again, in all its moments not merely from his [sic] own end but also from that of his partner: he must practise the kind of realization which I call inclusion" (p. 122). Buber stresses that the person who embodies empathic inclusion can, without sacrificing his or her own perception or lived reality, live through a common event from the perspective of the other.<sup>3</sup> A sense of inclusion, then, allows us to develop a deeply empathic understanding of and resonance with others in our surrounding ecologies. As educators, we are in the unique position of being able to understand and experience the lives of our students—an empathic move they are incapable of since they have no experience of being adult teachers. Our modeling of inclusion offers students the opportunity to learn from our embodiment of it. More significantly, as part of our environmental educative efforts, we can help students develop empathically inclusive capacities. Although there are a variety of ways of teaching empathy through practice, I am proposing three practices that can be incorporated as part of a comprehensive environmental education program.

### Three Practices to Develop These Dialogical Capacities

I will consider three practices that can facilitate the development of these dialogical capacities: artistic and contemplative practices, and the pedagogical practice of dialogue itself. If we assume, as do Jan Oakley, Bob Jickling, and Connie Russell (2008), that research includes finding new ways to "search out, engage with, and reflect upon, the world" (p. 5), then artistic, contemplative, and dialogical pedagogical practices fulfill the requirements of research into ecological identity. We can use these practices to discover our connections to others and to the various ecologies that surround and embed us.



## *Artistic Practice*

Art and artistry are, among other things, essentially and purposively acts of communication in which ideas are imaginatively created and communicated, in which understanding and relationships are created. They develop awareness, confirmation, and inclusion. The key is in creating opportunities where students have sufficient time to interact with their environment. Both artistic and contemplative practices offer opportunities to engage in what Philip Payne and Brian Wattchow (2009) call “slow” pedagogy: opportunities to slow things down and to take the time to become aware, and allow that awareness to lay the foundations for confirmation and inclusion. We also require openness, receptivity, and a surrendering humility. We must come, fully present, to the encounter, and we must attend with open hands, and empty and receptive minds. Buber (1947/2002) felt art and art making were dialogic in nature; he felt all art forms uniquely communicated a “perceived mystery” that developed understanding. In *I and Thou*, Buber (1958/2000) talks of art as an appearance that demands the fullness of one’s own being and engagement, one’s awareness, and one’s empathically inclusive effort to apprehend and bring into expression the full presence of other as a confirmation of that other:

True art is a loving art. To him [sic] who pursues such art there appears, when he experiences an existent thing, the secret shape of that thing .... This he does not see only with his eyes, rather he feels its outlines with his limbs; a heart beats against his heart. Thus he learns the glory of things. (Buber, 1957, p. 29)

As artists, we are required to attend fully to the other, to come to confirm its presence creatively, and to realize and then to express, as fully as we can, the reality and perspective of the other. The encounter is both existential and sensory; the artist’s encounter is a “meeting with the world and ever again a meeting with the world” (Buber, 1965, p. 151). The artistic encounter is demanding; as Rishma Dunlop (2008) maintains, the “risk” is that a person may withhold nothing; the whole being is required.

The rigors of artistic practice lie in attending as fully as possible to the other and being able to represent both the other’s fullness and its relationships, thus helping develop our sense of connectedness to that other and the realization of the other’s connectedness to its ecologies. Artistic rigor also lies in being able to represent the other in ways that convey its meaning and connections to us. Visual artist Frederick Franck (1973) asks the student to look more deeply: “we know the labels, but don’t know the wine” (p. 4). He will have students observe a subject carefully for extended periods, having them develop both a sense of the subject’s presence and its relational context. He then has them engage in drawing rapidly, attempting to capture that felt sense. Representational “accuracy” is not as important as the attempt to capture one’s perception of the other’s presence, wholeness, and connectedness. Students can then share their works with each other, outlining the meaning of the subject and their sense

of connectedness to it as depicted in the representation. Peter London (2003) points to the need for a holistic approach with artistry: engagement of not only the mind but also the senses, emotions, heart, and spirit; these offer “a replete and durable sense of being in the world” (p. 2). In a similar way, Thomas Merton (Merton & Griffin, 1970) used photography as a means of approaching the “hidden wholeness” of a subject, arguing for the need for a slow, sustained, and attentive engagement with the subject. Thus, students can be instructed not only in the basic arts of composition and exposure when engaging in photography of subjects in the natural and human landscapes, but also in trying to depict the essences and meanings of their subjects, as well as their ecological contexts. In working with students, I will suggest they try to capture what they feel to be the essence of the subject they are photographing and to engage in a classic photographic study where they expose a number of images portraying the subject from various angles and perspectives, trying also to capture the subject in its ecological contexts—its relationships to surrounding ecologies. Then we all will compare images, offering each other feedback about the subject, its portrayal, its meaning, and, just as significantly, the nature of our engagements with the subject; as well, students will engage in reflective writing about the subject, perhaps engaging in further research about it. These activities then lead to further opportunities to photograph the subject in attempts to more fully engage with it, to reveal the *Thou*. Using a variety of artistic practices in combination can further enhance the awareness of the other and the empathic confirmation of its presence.

### *Contemplative Practice*

Awareness of the other and our relationship is central to the dialogical relationship, as are the signs of address from the other. Contemplative practice has long been a principal method of focusing the mind and developing awareness. For example, the approach of Yoga as a system of contemplative practice is a systemic and integrated psychophysical process of *nirodha*,<sup>4</sup> restriction of the mental processes to an interiorized, concentrative point (Feuerstein, 1996). Daniel Goleman (1977) points out that meditative practices enjoin “continuous, full watchfulness of each successive moment, a global vigilance to the meditator’s chain of awareness” (p. 111). Heesoon Bai (2003) suggests the flow of discursive thoughts prevents us from developing close relationships with people and things we encounter, preventing us from perceiving their “Suchness”: “Disciplining the discursive involves arresting the incessant dissipative flow of mental stuffs and thereby disclosing the Ground of Being underneath” (n.p.). Bai argues that we can avoid a sense of alienation from others, and indeed from the world through the transformative practice of “intense, total, and sustained attention. Thus the first act we have to accomplish in learning to see is the stop. We have to stop the usual rushing-around with discursive labeling and calculative chattering” (n.p.). When we focus attention on the other, “subject” and “object,” self and other,

come together as co-emergent (Bai, 2001). The stilling of the mind through contemplative practices can lead a deepened awareness of the other and the other's address, thus leading to a closer sense of connection to the other. Contemplative practices, although difficult to master, are quite easy to learn, even for young adolescents, and they usually bear fruit quickly with regular practice. These can be used on their own, such as the classic practices of dispassionately observing the breath, common to a number of spiritual traditions, or they can be integrated into artistic practices by having students focus intently on a subject such as a tree, a rock, a landscape, or an urban scene, and to engage in the rigors of encountering it with fresh perception.

Artistic practices themselves can be contemplative and can be approached as opportunities to still the mind and deepen awareness. I will have students working with photography spend considerable time focusing on a subject in their attempts to capture what they feel are its essential characteristics; this requires them to still their bodies, their minds, and to focus their attention. Having students learn to focus their attention on a subject as part of their artistic practice deepens the engagement with the other, and the artistic practice itself becomes an almost ritualized, respectful engagement between students, teacher, and the artistic subject, as this passage from Zen artist John Daido Loori (2004) illustrates:

A calligraphy teacher bows to her students, lays out a sheet of paper, and slowly prepares *sumi-e* ink by rubbing an ink stone in a small dish containing water, until the ink has acquired the proper consistency. This process is a meditation for everyone involved. There is settling and stillness. The teacher moistens the brush in the ink and stands poised over the blank paper. In a single gesture, in a single breath, the brush touches the paper and the calligraphy is executed. The teacher cleans the brush, while maintaining her meditative absorption and attentiveness to detail. She bows to the students. The students then begin their work. The teacher moves among them, observing their progress, adjusting their arm or the angle of the brush. The entire process takes place, essentially, without verbal instruction. (p. 6)

### *A Relational Pedagogical Practice*

Finally, if we are to help students develop an ecological identity through dialogue, we might consider deepening our pedagogical practices which themselves embody dialogue. Developing *I-Thou* relationships in our classrooms moves us towards a deepened sense of ecological identity as we come to understand our close connectedness to others; we realize that we become more fully human through the *Thou* and through our relationship to the *Thou*. Buber (1965) maintains that arising awareness results from a conscious intention to enter into relations with another or others at any and all times. Moreover, the artistic and contemplative approaches are only valuable in the context of dialogical relationships between students and teachers where there are the opportunities for deep and extended conversations about the art-making or contemplative

practices; what is experienced, perceived, and made meaningful for the students; and how these impact their sense of related-ness to their surrounding ecologies. As well, these engagements between teachers and students need to embody or serve as opportunities to come to embody awareness, confirmation of the other, and empathic inclusion such that the engagements themselves foster an ecological sense of community. Inwood (2008) maintains that our educative efforts are designed to build connections and community, beginning with our relationships with and among students. As Paulo Freire writes: “Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other” (1970/2006, p. 72). These are the relational kinds of inquiry that need to be present, and our pedagogical approaches should embrace the development of relational awareness, confirm others and develop empathy, and proceed on the basis of an ecological situated-ness: those “present, existential, concrete situation[s]” (Freire, 1970/ 2006, p. 95) of the students and the class. Whether inside the classroom or out in nature, these kinds of inquiry could focus on ecological situatedness: conversations about our place in the environment and how we engage with it. How is the physical classroom or school situated in the surrounding community? What sense of connectedness is there between the activities of and teaching in the classroom and those occurring in the surrounding biotic communities? The pedagogical approach for the teacher is that she must go out with her whole being to meet both students and the world. One of the challenges is that we need to see and accept the dialogical engagements—ones which can involve considerable time in developing awareness, confirmation of the other, and empathy—as the curriculum itself. This might involve shifts in thinking about curriculum and curriculum planning.

## Conclusion

Bai (2009) maintains that approaches which help us “reanimate” the universe are more effective than moralistic persuasion in developing an ecological ethos: “The solution is to learn to truly become the kind of consciousness that embodies respect, compassion, care, and love. Let the eyes, ears, mouth, skin ... make love to the world!” (p. 145). Developing a dialogical awareness of enveloping ecologies through the rigors of becoming aware, confirmation, and inclusion—which can be developed through artistic, contemplative, and pedagogical practices oriented towards *I-Thou* relationships—offers students opportunities to develop more caring, sustainable relationships with their worlds, both locally and globally. These are the dialogically epistemic and ontological orientations that help us nurture an ecological identity. Such opportunities would represent one part of an integrated approach to environmental education in virtually any curricular area: in the classroom, the school environment, and the local community. As Inwood (2008) mentions, learners can use local environments and communities

as opportunities for engagement; an encounter with a *Taraxacum officinale* asserting itself in a fissure of schoolyard asphalt can represent an opportunity to see, to be, to dwell, and to develop an ecological identity in which one feels a greater connection to and responsibility for the various members of our biotic communities.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> For Buber, grace represents openness, receptivity, and surrendering humility.
- <sup>2</sup> Buber is referring to *Logos* which refers to “word,” “speech,” “reason,” or “meaning,” or, in the Johannine verses of the New Testament, the divine “Word” or representation of God. Buber is referring to them all but primarily to the fullness of meaning that an other embodies as *Thou*.
- <sup>3</sup> Buber asserted that he did not believe in empathy, but his concern was with the German conception of empathy common at the time: an aesthetic transposition of oneself into nature or an artistic representation of nature with an accompanying subjugation of one’s own perspective or felt reality—losing oneself in the landscape, so to speak. However, Buber’s (1947/2002) conception of inclusion has much in common with current affective and cognitive conceptions of empathy, characterized by his words: “this one person, without forfeiting anything of the felt reality of his activity, at the same time lives through the common event from the standpoint of the other” (p. 115). There is no loss of one’s own perspective or lived reality. For Buber, the *I* in the *I-Thou* relationship is just as significant as the *Thou*.
- <sup>4</sup> The Sanskrit term *Nirodha* translates roughly as “neutralization,” or “cessation,” or “control.” The foundational verse (1:2) from the *Yoga Sutras of Patanjali* (Chapple, 2008, pp. 4, 118, 143) defines yoga as “*chitta vritti nirodha*,” the cessation of the oscillations (or whirlpools) of the mind.

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